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THE BODY OF THE *MEDITERRANEAN/MOTHER* IN THE NEOLIBERAL AND THE BIO-POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Starting from bioethical and biopolitical questions set off in our time by the debate on biotechnologies and surrogacy, I am going to analyze here the ethical potential inherent in the Mother/Mediterranean binomial.

Keywords

Mother/Mediterranean binomial, biopolitics, neoliberalism, ethics.

Resumen

A partir de las cuestiones bioéticas y biopolíticas actuales surgidas del debate sobre las biotecnologías y la *surrogacy*, en este trabajo buscamos analizar la potencialidad ética presente en el binomio Madre/Mediterráneo.

Palabras clave

Binomio Madre/Mediterráneo, biopolíticas, neoliberalismo, ética.

Today we are involved in a very lively debate on surrogacy, which includes ethical, symbolic, sociological, psychological and obviously philosophical implications (articles in the most important dailies, meetings, talk shows, parliamentary interpellations). Such debate has highlighted major ideological conflicts on the biopolitical and bioethical issues related to surrogacy, and its intricacy with other matters has caused much confusion; hence the urgency to carry out this type of analysis. We are witnessing a process of radical transformation that requires new interpretation keys, given that modern biotechnology modifies, for better or for worse, our relationship with the world, and heavily affects the relationship between mother and child. The current various forms of intervention on women's reproductive system give rise to moral, juridical and social problems, whose complexity shows one shared element: the manipulation of the living being and the human intervention on the reproductive system, a process that for the first time is beyond the sole control of nature¹. Starting from bioethical and biopolitical questions set off in our time by the debate on biotechnologies and surrogacy, I am going to analyze here the ethical potential inherent in the Mother/Mediterranean binomial².

Philosophical thought, especially that of the female philosophers of the 20th century, will be the link to outline an unprecedented conceptual frame that will allow understanding the fresh paradigms useful to seek out new strategies with the aim to criticize and eliminate the limits and the negative effects produced by globalization and neoliberalism. To weave anew the threads of the humane through the symbolic figure of the mother, which is so obviously and insistently present in the thought of Antiquity, we need to work on some aspects of the so-called Mediterranean mother culture; particularly, it has to be understood as an integrating vision of attentive care for relations, as a culture centered on "life", as an alternative to a culture of war and subjugation.

Moving back to the historical roots of the exclusion of women, it will be a question of putting in the center of our culture a worldview anchored in a perspective that recently has been formulated in terms of processes of subjectivation and desubjectivation³.

In their ability to give birth, today more than ever before, female bodies hold a biological power that transforms their generative capacity into a value to take over in order to open new frontiers, also regarding the consequences of the global economy, and raising unprecedented questions in ethical, legal, and political fields. As philosopher Françoise Collin argued, the recent evolution of the relationship with the female

1. L. Battaglia, "Voci di donne. La bioetica in una prospettiva di genere", in M. Forcina (ed.), *Che cosa ci sta succedendo? Corpo, lavoro, politica, religione*, Milella, Lecce, 2009, p. 67.

2. D. Fernandez, *Mère Méditerranée*, Grasset, Paris, 2000.

3. A. Touraine, *Nous, sujets humains*, Seuil, Paris, 2015.

body from the generative point of view has radically transformed the assumptions of the feminist struggle and thought. From the slogan “A child if I want, when I want”, by which women, as political subjects, claimed their freedom towards sexuality and motherhood, nowadays the idea is to have children under any condition, even commercial ones. This results in a positive right to the lineage that is deconstructing the generative process in its different elements in order to reconstruct it artificially thanks to the new technologies operating on the living being⁴. In the light of all that’s occurring today, one should seriously wonder if the scientific discoveries will dim the transformations and the questions brought about by feminism⁵. Making the figure of the mother problematic, wondering what its dissolution entails due to the new scientific discoveries and the new technologies of human reproduction, means dealing with its complexity. As Alain Touraine, Pierre Dardot-Christian Laval and more recently Ida Dominijanni have demonstrated, these new technologies of human reproduction are developed and put in practice under the hard rule of neoliberalism⁶. On the assumption that the generative capacity is not merely an elementary function but comprises several various dimensions that are the foundation of our common humanity, and that to be born from a woman’s body is never an indifferent event, this work will go beyond the common positions of today –moral indignation *versus* merchandising of pregnancy– in order to find out new ways of thinking capable of understanding motherhood as a particular process of subjectivation closely related to women’s freedom. I know very well that dealing with the maternal is an impervious road full of contradictions, obstacles and blurred –if not lost– traces, and I am aware that neoliberal rationality⁷ produces subjectivations deriving from feminist thought and practice, but in a perverted form that inspires –as it was rightly noted– an idea of freedom oriented to competitive business-like principles, as an individual right aimed at self-increase, thus totally free from the juridical sphere of sovereignty. An idea profoundly different from the relational and political one supported by the feminist thought in the 20th century⁸. This difference is very important

4. F. Collin, “La gestazione per conto altrui”, in M. Forcina (ed.), *Che cosa ci sta succedendo? Corpo, lavoro, politica, religione*, Milella, Lecce, 2009, p. 57.

5. T. Dini, S. Tarantino, (eds.) *Femminismo e Neoliberalismo. Libertà femminile versus imprenditoria di sé e precarietà*, Natan edizioni, Benevento, 2014.

6. A. Touraine, *Comment sortir du libéralisme?*, Fayard, Paris, 1999; P. Dardot, C. Laval, *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale*, La Découverte, Paris, 2009; I. Dominijanni, *Il Trucco. Sessualità e biopolitica nella fine di Berlusconi*, Ediesse, Roma, 2014.

7. L. Bazzicalupo, *Il governo delle vite. Biopolitica ed economia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2006.

8. M. Esposito, “La libertà femminile nel passaggio dalla governamentalità biopolitica a neoliberale”, in T. Dini, S. Tarantino (eds.), *Femminismo e Neoliberalismo. Libertà femminile versus imprenditoria di sé e precarietà*, Natan edizioni, Benevento, 2014, pp. 138-139.

to me to give new meaning to a figure too often idealized and forgotten in its reality, as well as encrusted in millennia of interpretations informed by a patriarchal worldview. The maternal sphere, in the passage from sovereignty to biopolitics, has been “used” as a model to obtain sense of protection (care) and control over the living. Here subjectivity is nothing but “human capital” object of investments and profits, according to a perverted and insidious economic logic⁹. If we consider all the various theoretical productions of feminism, we see that they are now in a critical position: there are those who strongly oppose any use of biotechnology on the generative body of women in the name of a universalism of the maternal conscience, while on the other hand there are those who see it as a sort of liberation from the burden of reproduction as a merely natural function.

Quoting some insights by Adriana Cavarero, I will start from the fact that “stereotypes are not always a mere obstacle to a clear reflection. Those regarding mother figure, for example, maintain a great critical potentiality and are worth using. In other words, we should transform prejudice into an unconventional capacity of judgment”¹⁰. Highlighting the conceptual potentiality within mother figure, such as the new meaning that feminism has tried to provide it with, allows to find a completely different paradigm from the one marked by individualism; moreover, it underlines its ethical value within human civilization, and lets us better comprehend how this figure can have a key role against the limits and the negative effects resulting from the expansion of the neoliberal ideology worldwide. In Italy more than elsewhere, the “thought of sexual difference” has been deeply connected to the maternity sphere¹¹ and has intended the sexualisation of human experience as something that affects us not only culturally but also naturally; it has relied on the overflowing freedom of women, their “untamed” and “desiring” side which they have obstinately preserved as something irreducible and inalienable. Feminism has converted motherhood into an unconditional experience. Being and becoming a mother is a matter of liberty, not destiny. This was also the appeal by Virginia Woolf, who advocated more space in the world for enlarging women’s freedom.

My hypothesis is based on the ability of female subjectivity to break and change things. As Luce Irigaray has highlighted, female subjectivity is an open one and never refers to a fixed identity but has always in itself a reference to otherness¹². This openness to otherness is the symbolic pivot by which women escape the symbolic patriarchal

9. A. Putino, *I corpi di mezzo. Biopolitica, differenza tra i sessi e governo della specie*, T. Dini (ed.), ombre corte, Verona, 2011.

10. A. Cavarero, *Inclinazioni. Critica della rettitudine*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 2014, p. 24.

11. L. Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 2006.

12. L. Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, Minuit, Paris, 1984.

logic of oneness. Feminist thought has highlighted that the subject is a consequence of dualistic binarity (of the rejection of the principle of oneness), that caused the disembodied split which established a new conception of subjectivity against subjectivity that is based on “the one”. This split of the principle of oneness is the cause of the break-up of the principle of the both, because “two” becomes then the sheer specular duplication of the logic of oneness. The question is then to defuse the patriarchal binary opposition, to give life to a new way of thinking the own subjectivity and that of other people¹³.

This is why the question of subjectivity and of subjectivation cannot prescind from a profound confrontation with women’s mentality, as they have reformulated and remodelled subjectivity by questioning the idea of sovereignty of the subject, of his/her solipsism, his/her autonomy and his/her independence, in favor of his/her essential relationship and vulnerability understood as ontological figures of the human condition¹⁴.

From this point of view, feminism can function not only as a permanent laboratory of practices of freedom and strategies of resistance against the biopolitical hold on life and bodies¹⁵, but also as a form of knowledge that, starting from a reflection rooted in the body, highlights the possibility to have altruistic ethics and a relational ontology based on interdependence, unconditionality, vulnerability and reciprocity. As a matter of fact, women’s generating body has always been the place where power is decisively at stake. Women have long known that their body is a place of conflict, of subordination, even of exploitation, but they know that it is also the place of an ever-changing process of incarnation, which is especially defined as an expression of the creativity of the self, invention, vitality, courage, existence, all terms that have no place in “neutral” theories¹⁶.

However, we have to be watchful not to fall back into the cliché that equates the feminine with the maternal. Actually, this claimed correspondence is not a natural fact but the result of a political will and a cultural force endorsed by men as it supported their way of living. Motherhood is here understood as *one* of the women’s creative potentials, expressing their willingness to embrace confidence and trust, a means to powerfully affirm their history and take control of their bodies again. In the debate on surrogacy, Italian philosopher Luisa Muraro has urged the protection of maternal relationship as

13. I. Dominijanni, “Soggetto dell’inconscio, inconscio della politica”, in *Filosofia politica*, XXVI, 1, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2012, p. 32. Cfr. Ead, “Libertà precaria”, in T. Dini, S. Tarantino (eds.), *Femminismo e Neoliberalismo. Libertà femminile versus imprenditoria di sé e precarietà*, Natan edizioni, Benevento, 2014, p. 55.

14. Cfr. A. Touraine, *Le monde des femmes*, Fayard, Paris, 2006; L. Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous. Pour une culture de la différence*, Grasset, Paris, 1990; J. Butler, *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence*, Verso, London-New York, 2006; A. Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1997.

15. T. Dini, *La materiale vita. Biopolitica, vita sacra, differenza sessuale*, Mimesis, Milano, 2016, p. 13.

16. O. Guaraldo, “Lettrice dell’editoriale”, in *La teoria non è un ombrello. Dieci anni di AdaTeoriaFemminista*, Orthotes, Salerno, 2016, p. 198.

it has provided human coexistence with the hallmark of civilization. It is part of what is out of reach to the neoliberal grip; for even if a mother is replaceable, the maternal relationship is not¹⁷. Here because, as it has been noted, rethinking the maternal means rethinking the primary relation, and rethinking the primary relation means rethinking politics too, repeating the founding gesture of feminism that has never ceased to question the body but that perhaps in recent times has not been able to stand up to the indiscriminate proliferation –in the media, in politics, biopolitics and bioethics– of debates on the body that have turned it again into an object, an instrument, a container¹⁸. In fact, the mark of maternal relation reveals a non-vertical posture “typically inclined towards the external, which leads us out of our own self. Mother –in Cavarero’s words– is the name of a function that involves the responsibility present in the opening scene of the human condition in which it is absolutely vulnerable and armless, so that it becomes an essential figure of ethics and especially of ontology and politics”¹⁹.

This is why the female knowledge of and about the body has the potential to become today’s knowledge of the other, of another way of relating with each other and of inhabiting the world.

The events of motherhood and birth are indeed essential relational passages that involve several dimensions: biological, symbolic, affective, linguistic, social, cultural, and economic. As Julia Kristeva reminds us, they represent the dawning of our link with the other, since maternal psyche establishes itself as the passage from *zoé* to *bios*, from psychology to biography, from nature to culture. Extending this concept, maternal psyche appears as love for anybody, in the form of a constant process of adoption of the otherness, inside and outside oneself²⁰. Philosophy would forget this essential point of otherness and attention, of love for the particular. Moreover, it is just because of this irreducible part of love that the figure of the mother cannot be reduced to a merely biological phenomenon of reproduction; thus, it should rather be seen as something that refers to the creative power of life itself.

Formerly it was the patriarchal imagination, now it is the technology regarding the reproductive body that is unable to understand motherly love as a relational practice, the care of one body for another body, which receives and gives meaning in the very act of nurturing and looking after.

17. L. Muraro, *L'anima del corpo. Contro l'utero in affitto*, La Scuola, Brescia, 2016, p. 30.

18. O. Guaraldo, “Lettrice dell’editoriale”, in *La teoria non è un ombrello*, p. 199.

19. A. Cavarero, *Inclinazioni. Critica della rettitudine*, Raffello Cortina, Milano, 2014, p. 145.

20. J. Kristeva, *Le Génie féminin*, t. I, *La vie*, Fayard, Paris, 1999.

A place of love and conflict, as Adrienne Rich reminds us so profoundly in *Of Woman Born*, and a place of understanding of the other –an endless and exhausting but also extraordinary enterprise²¹. Mother-matter-measure-marine: four words deriving from the Sanskrit root *Mâ* that symbolize the generation of all things in their right size, properly distinguished, the orderly and balanced manifestation of things and beings through a principle of natural justice.

French philosopher Simone Weil identified this principle of symbolic equality or natural justice not in the Grecian-Roman antiquity, but in the Mediterranean civilization that preceded it. This principle originates from the ancient Mediterranean religions, from initiation doctrines and mysteries centred on a female spirituality associated with wisdom, an ethical concept of pure geometric space that is intimately linked with the mythologies of the Great Mother, of Demeter, Cybele, Astarte, Ishtar, Isis, and more²². Starting from this insight, Simone Weil advocated the creation of a new civilization, yet old in spirit, encouraging the writing of eternal things so that they could be contemporary. Therefore, according to her view, the symbolism revolving around the figure of the mother is linked to a primordial form of natural justice.

In my latest book²³, through the thought of two female philosophers of the 20th century, namely María Zambrano and Simone Weil, I intended to show how, since antiquity, the philosophical, ethical and political element in the thought of sexual difference has investigated the origin from which the social and institutional order of Western civilization is structured. Because it is from this structuration that in the Grecian *polis* the symbolic and material dominance on women was definitively consolidated in what still today is defined, under various forms, as “patriarchal order”. Expressing their criticism against the Western philosophical tradition and its hierarchically conceived system based on a univocal and fictitiously neutral way of thinking about the living being and the whole reality, Zambrano and Weil underlined the violence and the arrogance of Western metaphysics regarding the materiality of the maternal body. Such mentality caused a disproportionate exceeding the limits imposed on the human condition in favor of an increasingly more calculating intellectual *objectification* of human nature and reality. On top of that, the continuous and systematic devaluation of the material body has caused the destruction of that ancient knowledge that first dealt with the original connection of body, soul, and world.

21. Cfr. A. Rich, *Of woman born: motherhood as experience and institution*. Norton, New-York, 1976.

22. S. Weil, *OEuvres complètes. 1941-1942: Grèce-Inde-Occitanie*, t. IV, vol. 2, Gallimard, Paris, 2013, p. 240.

23. Cfr. S. Tarantino, *ἀνευ μητρός/senza madre L'anima perduta dell'Europa. María Zambrano e Simone Weil*, La scuola di Pitagora, Napoli, 2014.

It has widely known that the use of mythical and literary sources from the Mediterranean area has played a crucial role in the process of civilization both in Orient and in Occident. In particular, such figures led to a worldview focused on a mother-oriented matrix based on the cyclical nature of time and on a primary vision of life that promoted non-dominant relationships concerning the living beings and the earth; it symbolized the fecundity of the female body and of nature itself, very different from the one that established itself in the Grecian civilization.

Neapolitan philosopher Angela Putino wrote that thinking about the Mediterranean from a female point of view means turning to writings often not grasped by signs, suspended in an involucre of images, which provide the *incipit* of narration yet pause, neither accomplished nor unresolved²⁴. In particular, those figures carried a worldview based on the Mediterranean area that was an essential principle of connection among living beings; then, when this mother-oriented civilization came to an end, it managed to survive in folk tales and fables, in dialects and languages and in some ancient sculptures.

It is my firm idea that future can be generated only by taking over these traces, even if all that is left is this ancestral and powerful sense of justice.

As recently claimed by Silvia Niccolai:

Motherhood has much to do with our capacity of questioning ourselves about what is right; it's because of it that we were born with the sense of diversity, of disparity, of more; the issue, the need and the capacity of justice are originated by the existence of differences. In a world of equals, no human being could ever discover the possibility to question themselves about justice, as well as the necessity to do it with others²⁵.

It is no coincidence that today these struggles for justice are carried forward by movements like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the Tienanmen Mothers, the women in Acerra (a town near Naples) who fight against the devastating effects of waste incinerators on their land, in the pacifist movement of the Women in Black, in the Women Wage Peace movement that marched for peace from northern Israel to Jerusalem in October 2016, who, unheeded by the media, created an alliance and composed and performed a folk song called "Prayer of the Mothers".

24. A. Putino, "Arte e mare. Un mediterraneo femminile: progetto di un ricorso", in *Orizzonti economici*, 58, 1987, p. 103.

25. S. Niccolai, "La costituzionalista Silvia Niccolai interviene sulla questione dell' utero in affitto", November 25, 2015, available at <http://www.libreriadelledonne.it/la-costituzionalista-silvia-niccolai-interviene-sulla-questione-dellutero-in-affitto/>.

Such concrete examples show us the outline of a new form of justice which moves away from the subjective hold resulting from the illusory and undue claims of neoliberalism, which have nothing to do with the unpredictable female subjectivity mentioned by Neapolitan philosopher Angela Putino; in accordance with Carla Lonzi, she intended it as action:

Inspired by the original name of justice, which makes visible what once was invisible, starting from something other than objectivity or adherence to political attitudes resulting from the logic of personal interests. It is strictly impersonal subjectivity and it is political just because it cannot be understood in any other way²⁶.

In this “not exactly inside”, in this “intimate estrangement” lies the deepest knowledge of the roots too soon extirpated from the Mediterranean civilization, but we may still rely on that to provide our present time with a new meaning.

26. A. Putino, “Impersonale della politica”, in S. Tarantino, G. Borrello (eds.), *Esercizi di composizione per Angela Putino. Filosofia, differenza sessuale e politica*, Liguori, Napoli, 2010, p. 110.